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AUTHOR	O'Banion, Terry
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ABSTRACT

At the tail end of the last millennium a learning revolution began to emerge across the educational landscape, challenging traditional assumptions in elementary and secondary education, community colleges, four-year colleges, and universities. The Learning Revolution emerged from the failures of reform efforts triggered by the 1983 publication of "A Nation at Risk." The Learning Revolution that has emerged in the last decade has placed an increased emphasis on learning. Benchmark activities and questions related to the Learning Revolution are offered in this article as an inventory for use by colleges and universities committed to becoming more learning-centered institutions. They include: (1) revising mission statements; (2) involving all stakeholders; (3) selecting faculty and staff; (4) training faculty and staff; (5) holding conversations about learning; (6) identifying and agreeing on learning outcomes; (7) assessing and documenting learning outcomes; (8) redefining faculty and staff roles; (9) providing more options; (10) creating opportunities for collaboration; (11) orienting students to new options and responsibilities; (12) applying information technology; (13) reallocating resources; and (14) creating a climate for learning. (VWC)

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An Inventory for Learning-Centered Colleges

Terry O'Banion

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At the tail end of the last millennium a Learning Revolution began to emerge across the educational landscape, challenging traditional assumptions in elementary and secondary education, community colleges, four-year colleges, and universities. The Learning Revolution emerged from the failures of reform efforts triggered by the 1983 publication of *A Nation at Risk*. A decade of reform aimed at modifying existing educational systems had done little to increase school achievement or prepare students for the changing world of work. Some critics called for abandoning schools altogether, while others, such as Davis and Botkin (1994), warned of impending privatization: "Over the next few decades the private sector will eclipse the public sector and become the major institution responsible for learning." In the 1993 report, *An American Imperative: Higher Expectations for Higher Education*, the Wingspread Group on Higher Education succinctly stated the challenge to come: "We must redesign all our learning systems to align our entire education enterprise with the personal, civic, and workplace needs of the twenty-first century."

Motivated by these lessons and admonitions, and spurred by the need to contain rising costs, assuage growing public dissatisfaction with higher education, and take advantage of the promise of information technology, the Learning Revolution began taking shape in the early 90s. In 1994, the cover of *Business Week* declared "The Learning Revolution" in progress. In 1995, *Time* devoted its education section to "The

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Learning Revolution." At the same time, a number of significant statements from higher education groups about the importance of placing learning first began to appear. In 1994, the Education Commission of the States issued *A Model for the Reinvented Higher Education System: State Policy and College Learning* asking for "radical alternatives to current operations." In the same year, the National Policy Board of Higher Education Institutional Accreditation asserted that for accreditation to be effective in the future it would be necessary "to elevate the importance of student learning." The American College Personnel Association also issued a 1994 statement, *The Student Learning Imperative*, which challenged student affairs professionals to reconceptualize their role on college campuses and "make student learning the primary focus of their activities."

In 1995, the Association of American Colleges and Universities distributed a paper, *The Direction of Educational Change: Putting Learning at the Center*, calling for liberal learning to be updated to reflect the emerging emphasis on learning. Also in 1995, *Change* magazine published a seminal article by Barr and Tagg, who declared "In the Learning Paradigm, the mission of the college is to produce learning." In the *Change* editorial of March/April 1997, devoted to the Barr and Tagg article, Ted Marchese wrote that "no single article in recent years has created so much response."

In 1996, the American Council on Education weighed in with *Guiding Principles for Distance Learning in a Learning Society*, which is bursting with the language of "learners and learning providers." The Western Governor's Association, in a 1996 announcement of the creation of a virtual university, included comments by Governor Nelson of Nebraska: "the barriers of time and place are eroding, and opportunities to learn are everywhere." Governor Leavitt of Utah underscored the emerging perspective:

"education no longer has to be bound by place. In the Knowledge Age, the knowledge will go where the people are."

In 1997 and 1998 the pace of the Learning Revolution gained momentum. The first national conference on "The New Learning Paradigm," sponsored by eleven national organizations, was held in San Diego. Anker Publishing Company released *The Learning Revolution* by Diana Oblinger and Sean Rush. The American Council on Education and the American Association of Community Colleges jointly published *A Learning College for the 21st Century* by Terry O'Banion, which won the 1998 Phillip E. Frandson Award for Literature in Higher Education. With support from the W. K. Kellogg Foundation, the National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges issued a special report, *Returning to Our Roots: The Student Experience*, setting out three broad ideals:

- Our institutions must become genuine learning centers,
- Our learning communities should be student centered, and
- Our learning communities should emphasize the importance of a healthy learning environment.

In 1999 the Pew Charitable Trusts supported a number of initiatives to explore deeper issues related to the Learning Revolution, awarding grants to Alverno College and to the League for Innovation in the Community College to examine and experiment with the assessment of learning outcomes. The League for Innovation also received a $1.1 million grant from another donor to create ten Learning Colleges to serve as models for other educational institutions.

These statements, conferences, and publications from national organizations and grants from national foundations confirm that a Learning Revolution has emerged in the last decade. While these actions have been helpful in setting the stage for an increased emphasis on learning, colleges and universities now need practical advice and direction in how to proceed if they are to implement the ideals of the Learning Revolution. It will be helpful to identify some guidelines colleges and universities can use to check their progress in becoming more learning-centered institutions. In the early stages of a new reform effort, it is not possible to know all of the policies, programs, and practices that will emerge through experimentation, but it is possible to identify some of the basic activities related to change and to pose key questions about those activities. Benchmark activities and questions related to the Learning Revolution are offered here as an inventory for use by colleges and universities committed to becoming more learning-centered institutions.

1. **Revising Mission Statements**

Every institution of higher education has a mission statement. In the mission statement all institutions note their service to the community and usually refer to a key role they play in the society at large. Community colleges often emphasize their commitment to teaching, and universities often stress their commitment to research. Learning has always been implied as a mission of institutions of higher education, but until very recently, learning has not been an explicit mission of colleges and universities.

- Have discussions been held among key constituents regarding the relevancy of the current mission statement in reference to the Learning Revolution?

- Has the mission statement been revised to include an emphasis on learning?

- Did the revision process involve all stakeholders, and did they achieve a general consensus?

- Was the governing board involved in the revision process? Has the board approved the revised statement?

- Has an institution-wide action plan been developed to implement the revised mission statement?

2. **Involving All Stakeholders**

Influenced by practices from Total Quality Management and philosophies undergirding concepts of the learning organization, institutions of higher education, especially community colleges, are beginning to include all their staff members (full-time and part-time faculty, administrators, and support and clerical staff) as equal participants in becoming more learning-centered institutions. In many institutions, students and members of the governing board are included as stakeholders; in some cases community representatives are also included.

- Have key leaders carefully considered their position on involving all stakeholders in planning and implementing more learning-centered practices?

- To what extent are support and clerical staff involved in the formal governance processes of the institution?

- Do all staff members have equal access to training and staff development programs?

- How are roles and rewards differentiated for the various stakeholder groups?

3. **Selecting Faculty and Staff**

For institutions committed to becoming more learning-centered, all new faculty, administrators, and support staff should be selected based on criteria reflecting the new emphasis on learning. Some colleges have developed statements of values regarding their commitment to learning that extends the basic mission statement, and these documents are excellent sources for establishing selection criteria. All new staff should be committed to the culture of placing learning first and should bring skills and competencies related to creating learning for students as their first priority, or at least be willing to develop the appropriate skills and competencies through staff training programs. Chaffey College in California has created a faculty profile to be used by committees in selecting new faculty. This profile calls for evidence of "ability to facilitate the learning process, commitment to developing learning outcomes and designing alternative approaches to learning, and commitment to integrating new technology into the learning process," among many other criteria.

- Has the institution completed a study of retirement plans of current faculty and administrators and projected a ten-year replacement program?
- Have criteria for recruiting and selecting new employees to work in a new learning paradigm been determined and implemented?
- Have selection committees been trained in applying the criteria?
- Have the criteria been linked to staff evaluation and staff development programs?

4. **Training Faculty and Staff**

In *An American Imperative* (1993) The Wingspread Group on Higher Education suggested that "putting learning at the heart of the academic enterprise will mean overhauling the conceptual, procedural, curricular, and other architecture of

postsecondary education on most campuses." If such a staggering task is to be achieved, all staff in the institution will need to participate in a massive training program. Training will be needed in the processes required to bring about change, including such techniques as problem solving, decision making, planning and budgeting, and values clarification. Training will be required in understanding and applying the tools of information technology and assessment, understanding new research and theories on learning, and developing appropriate learning outcomes.

- Have training priorities been determined and resources allocated?
- How do the training activities required for the Learning Revolution interface with existing staff development programs?
- How is training provided, for whom, and with what frequency?
- What motivates stakeholders to participate in the training programs?
- To what extent do staff training programs reflect the practices inherent in a new paradigm of learning for students?

5. **Holding Conversations About Learning**

As the Learning Revolution spreads across higher education, more attention has been paid to processes and structures than to issues of how much and what kind of learning are envisioned. A majority of educators seem to agree with students that learning skills to secure employment is a primary goal, but other educators voice concerns about educating the "whole student." Conversations that emerge about learning often deteriorate into shouting matches between well-worn positions on liberal or general education versus vocational education or on issues related to the role of research versus

teaching or teaching versus learning. There has been little discussion about deeper and more powerful learning, learning for recall, learning for understanding, or learning for appreciation.

If a new learning paradigm is to emerge, college stakeholders must engage in a series of conversations about the kinds of learning they value and the kinds of learning they will provide their students. Such conversations will be richly appreciated by many educators who long for more substantive discussions about their core values regarding the educational enterprise.

- Are there individuals and groups in the institution sufficiently knowledgeable about learning who can lead these conversations?
- Have external consultants been identified who can assist with these conversations?
- Have a purpose and process been developed to focus the conversations and capture the outcomes for use in creating a new learning paradigm?
- Who will participate in the conversations?

6. **Identifying and Agreeing on Learning Outcomes**

Once an institution determines the kinds of learning it values, the next step is to identify and agree on specific learning outcomes that reflect these values. This is not an easy task, and some reform efforts will flounder at this juncture in the journey to become more learning centered. As difficult as it is to identify and agree on learning outcomes, however, this is the step required to implement most of the other key steps. Knowing what the student must learn to meet the requirements of every course and every program frees students and faculty to explore many options to achieve the stated outcomes. The Community College of Denver has identified and agreed upon exit competencies for

every program it offers, making it possible for students and faculty to work together toward these learning outcomes. The national standards beginning to materialize for a variety of curricula and for workforce programs also provide some useful guidance in this process.

- Is there general agreement across the institution regarding the value and importance of identifying and agreeing on learning outcomes?
- Have leaders created a mechanism and instituted a pilot program for this process to begin?
- Is there a plan to engage every faculty member, every program, and every department in identifying and agreeing on learning outcomes?
- Is the institution providing resources (training, reference material, release time, consultants) to assist staff with this difficult task?

7. **Assessing and Documenting Learning Outcomes**

It does little good to identify and agree on learning outcomes unless there is also a plan for assessing and documenting the achievement of the outcomes. This is usually obvious to most educators, but since assessment and documentation are so important in learning-centered practices, it is made more visible in this inventory by identifying it as a basic element separate from number 6 above. Fortunately, the major testing companies—ETS, ACT, and The College Board—are engaged in creating more useful tools for assessing learning readiness and learning achievement, with computerized placement testing as a good example of a time-free and place-free tool. The regional accrediting associations are also beginning to set standards related to learning outcomes, standards that will greatly assist the expansion of assessment processes.

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Many faculty feel that some of the most important learning they help create cannot be measured, and they articulate strong and compelling positions. It would be helpful if these faculty would work with assessment experts in an attempt to measure these valuable outcomes of learning so they can be incorporated in the new learning paradigm. Some of the assessment practices explored in the Humanistic Education Movement of the 1960s and 70s might be useful here as well as some of the practices of documenting experiential learning through portfolio assessment.

- Is there general agreement across the institution regarding the value and importance of assessing and documenting learning outcomes?
- Have courses and programs that already do a good job of assessing learning outcomes been identified in the institution, and are these courses and programs cited as examples for others to explore?
- Have the major assessment instruments developed by testing companies been reviewed for relevancy?
- Have faculty been encouraged to develop creative approaches for measuring learning outcomes that are not easily measured by traditional tests?
- Is the college experimenting with documenting student learning in ways other than grades and credit?

8. **Redefining Faculty and Staff Roles**

In *A Learning College for the 21st Century*, I suggest six key principles to guide the development of a more learning-centered institution. Principle Four states, "The learning college defines the roles of learning facilitators by the needs of the learners." This is a radical statement, especially for faculty, whose roles have been greatly determined by their former teachers and mentors and the culture of their discipline guilds. Most staff in colleges and universities are role-bound. In community colleges formulas

dictate one faculty per four or five classes, 30-35 students per class, three class hours a week for a three-credit course, in a 16 week semester. What if the formulas were tossed out and the roles of staff redesigned to meet the needs of learning in a culture that placed learning first? Traditional structures and staff roles would remain in place for many students who work best in that environment, but some faculty and staff would create new roles to provide alternative learning structures to usher in a revolution in learning.

- Have leaders reviewed the emerging literature on learning and determined the kinds of faculty and staff roles needed to make the institution more learning centered?
- Have key faculty and staff been identified who model facets of the desired roles, and have they been enlisted in plans for institutional change in this area?
- Has there been an inventory of the underutilized skills, competencies, and desires of faculty and staff that could be applied in a more learning-centered environment?
- Have reward systems been identified that will encourage faculty and staff to gravitate toward these new roles?
- Have institutional structures been realigned and barriers eliminated to allow these new roles to flourish?

9. **Providing More Options**

If students learn differently—and common wisdom and research on cognitive styles strongly support this assumption—then it follows that students are likely to increase their learning if their different learning styles are accounted for in the instructional process. Colleges can better address the variety of learning styles by offering more options in the way learning experiences are provided. The goal for learning-centered colleges is to increase the options in terms of delivery for every course

offered. Biology 200 should continue to be offered in the traditional lecture/discussion mode for students who respond best to that approach. But Biology 200 should also be offered in small group formats with collaboration on projects as the primary approach, in self-directed reading formats, and in interactive formats using information technology in stand-alone systems or instructor-directed approaches. All of the basic instructional methods have value; the goal is to increase the options for every course so that students can "sign up" for the learning experience in which they are most likely to succeed.

- Has the college made an inventory of the variety of instructional approaches currently in use by its faculty? How many varieties are in use for each course?
- Has the college reviewed the literature regarding the variety of instructional approaches that have proven effective in producing learning?
- Does the college have a plan for increasing the number of instructional delivery options for its students?
- Has the college explored the literature on learning styles and experimented with assessment instruments for determining differences in learning styles?

10. **Creating Opportunities for Collaboration**

While some students learn best working alone, there is increasing evidence that collaboration among students can lead to improved and expanded learning for a great many. The case is also made that collaboration is a skill much needed by a society whose sense of community appears to be in decline and especially by employers who need teams to address complex issues and tasks. Educational institutions that want to become more learning centered will model collaborative approaches in their planning and will create a great many learning options for students based on collaboration.

- To what extent does the institution use collaboration in planning and developing its policies, programs, and practices?

- To what extent has the institution experimented with collaborative learning experiences for students such as learning communities and project-based education?

- Is the value of collaboration reflected in mission statements, program descriptions, course designs, and reward systems?

11. **Orienting Students to New Options and Responsibilities**

Orienting first-time students or returning adults to the college experience is given short shrift across all institutions of higher education. Universities often do a better job and typically offer a week's orientation, whereas community colleges seldom offer more than a partial orientation day, and that on a voluntary basis. In a learning-centered institution, the culture will be so different from the past that an intensive, sustained orientation becomes essential if students are to succeed in the new environment. Orientation will take whatever time is required, weeks or months, to help students (a) learn to take responsibility for their own education and (b) learn to navigate the great variety of options available to them. The orientation process in a learning-centered institution will be so learning-intensive that it will be as worthy of credit as any content course.

- Has the institution created a sufficient number of options for the delivery of learning and a system for matching student learning styles to these options to make it obvious that students will require a more thorough orientation?

- Have the faculty and staff agreed on the student's responsibility for providing information, planning programs, making decisions, exploring options, and signing agreements, and are these expectations documented and communicated to all potential and current students and to all stakeholders?

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- Has the current orientation process been reviewed and revised to expand experiences that will ensure a more thorough orientation to increased learning options and increased student responsibilities?

12. **Applying Information Technology**

Even if there were no revolution in learning, the ubiquitous application of information technology to every facet of the educational enterprise is creating monumental change that gives the appearance of a revolution. It is possible, however, to create a technology-rich environment on campus without increasing and expanding learning in the substantive ways expected by institutions strongly committed to becoming more learning centered. To date, most faculty have adopted information technology primarily to extend what they already do—organize and present information to students. There is very little evidence that this kind of application of technology will increase learning productivity.

Information technology, however, is a valuable tool for supporting the learning revolution to create more expanded and improved learning for students. Technology is absolutely essential for *managing* the student flow process, the variety of instructional delivery options, and the use of facilities and personnel; for *creating* stand-alone systems for instructional delivery, systems that support and enhance teacher-driven options, and systems that provide systematic feedback and progress checks for learners; and for *linking* instructional units, external resources, and students and faculty in collaborative communities.

- Is there a long-range information technology plan to ensure the appropriate purchase and upgrading of equipment and a program for faculty and staff training?

- Does the technology plan include specific reference to how technology will be used to increase and expand learning for students?

- Has the college carefully reviewed how technology can be applied to improve orientation, assessment, advisement, registration, instructional delivery, progress monitoring, interactions with faculty and other students, access to resources, and competencies and goals achieved — all based on improving and expanding learning for students?

- Has the college addressed how it will increase access to information technology for all its students?

13. **Reallocating Resources**

Many educators assume that the learning revolution will be achieved by "adding on" new policies, programs, practices, and personnel which will require a considerable infusion of new resources. On the contrary, the traditional institutional response of "adding on" will not work to create a learning revolution. In the first place, the learning revolution will mean "over-hauling the conceptual, procedural, curricular, and other architecture or postsecondary education," as stated by the Wingspread Group on Higher Education. In the second place, it does not appear that in the foreseeable future additional funds will be allocated to operate the educational enterprise. Overhauling the traditional architecture means making substantive changes in existing programs and practices and in the way existing personnel are used.

- Have the roles of administrators and managerial staff been examined for increased efficiency?

- Is the institution experimenting with alternative workload formulas, especially the basic ratio of one faculty for every five courses?

- To what extent are institutional control measures such as program deletion, reduction in personnel, early retirement programs, and frozen salary schedules couched in the framework of the Learning Revolution?

- To what extent have part-time faculty, paraprofessionals, and volunteers been factored in as a resource to increase and expand student learning?

- To what extent have community resources been tapped to help the institution become more learning centered?

14. **Creating a Climate for Learning**

None of the thirteen activities noted above will occur without leadership by the president or a key individual or a small group of key individuals. And regardless of the source of leadership, that leadership must work hard to create an institutional culture that supports learning as a major value and priority of an increasing number of stakeholders. Careful attention must be paid to language, communication structures, recognition and rewards, traditional values and historic successes, substantive issues, individual and group roles, resources, barriers – all the elements of institutional culture that can support and inhibit change and experimentation.

- Is a visible institutional leader(s) committed to creating a climate for learning?

- Is the leader(s) experienced in change theories and processes to sustain the momentum?

- Is the leader(s) sufficiently knowledgeable of issues and ideas related to the Learning Revolution to serve as a respected spokesperson?

- Is the general climate of the college sufficiently healthy to support major changes that will challenge established ways of doing business?

- Is there a general belief that the outcome will be worth all the effort?

These fourteen activities and their related questions appear to be key challenges for colleges and universities committed to becoming more learning centered. There are surely other activities and even more focused questions that can be added to assist

educational institutions in an inventory of their learning-centered policies, programs, and practices. For those pioneering institutions that plan to continue their journeys well into the 21st century to become more learning centered, this inventory will help them take stock, gauge progress, and realign efforts. The journey to become a more learning-centered institution will never be complete, but we are beginning to know enough to review the map and read the signs to make sure we are still headed in the right direction.